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1913

*D. Bakst*

ASSOCIATION, MONTREAL

Special Exhibition  
of the Work of  
LÉON BAKST

1914





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DECEMBER 17th, 1914  
ART GALLERY : MONTREAL

INTRODUCTION BY  
MARTIN BIRNBAUM

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## LÉON BAKST

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The city of Paris, which calls him *notre incomparable*, shares the honor of having discovered Léon Bakst with Serge de Diaghilew, the enterprising director of the Russian ballet. St. Petersburg, the Artist's birthplace, treated him rather harshly, although it had not denied him a certain measure of success, so long as he consented to work in the fashionable manner and devote himself to portraiture and the commonplace fields of art. The portraits of his early period were, however, not conventional achievements, if we may judge by his sensitive likeness of the poet Andrej Bely, or the crisp character sketch of the composer Balakirew. Bakst's historical paintings also show distinct originality, although they reveal the influence of Kaulbach and Cornelius. These works won commercial recognition for the artist, but they did not satisfy his restless nature, and he went to Paris in search of freedom. His first visit to the city of his adoption took place in 1895 when Bakst was twenty-seven years old, and there he worked for three years under the versatile Finnish artist Albert Edelfeldt. The Russian Government was at that time still rejoicing over the French alliance, and Bakst was commissioned to paint a canvas commemorating the ovation given to Admiral Avelan of the Russian fleet when he visited France. This painting now hangs in the Museum at Petrograd. With his friends Constantin

Somow, Alexandre Benois, and the late Valentin Sérow, he became a progressive artistic propagandist, by starting a magazine "*Mir Iskusstva*" ("The World of Art"), and he sought further relief from uncongenial activities by making exquisite black-and-white rococo book decorations, which show that he was acquainted with the works of Aubrey Beardsley. Interior decorations in a style resembling *Empire*, miniature paintings, strange caricatures, mural designs like the delicately beautiful "Swallows and Mimosa," and pretty theatrical figurines were other relaxations. The pompous Russian capital, however, would not tolerate any very daring innovations, and Bakst was severely condemned by the Academy when he sent in a realistic painting of an old woman holding the mutilated remains of her son in her arms, representing the Virgin Mary weeping over the body of Christ. The attack upon him led to open hostility. Realizing that he could never hope to succeed while continually up in arms against officialdom, he finally left Petrograd and he now resides in a well appointed studio on the Boulevard Malesherbes.

It was not until 1906, however, at the admirable Russian exhibition which was then arranged in Paris by Diaghilew, that Bakst and other talented men won more general recognition. The distinguished *regisseur* urged a group of the exhibiting artists to work for the Russian Imperial theatres, and Bakst, who is a devoted student of Homer, was asked to make designs for classical plays with Greek settings, like the "Ædipus." His originality, how-

ever, again aroused old enemies at home, and their mutterings were not hushed until Paris set the seal of her approval on the brilliant innovator.

It was our privilege to be present when Bakst obtained his real introduction at the Théâtre du Châtelet in June, 1909. From the moment when the curtain arose to the music which Arensky had written for the artist's ballet "Cléopâtre," until the amorous queen's galley glided down the river with its precious burden, there was never a false note struck. The settings were built upon extremely simple lines: a vast Egyptian hall surrounded by massive columns between which you caught glimpses of the glistening sapphire Nile. The prevailing color was a brilliant orange, and the great stones, which seem to have absorbed the golden sunlight, suggested deserts of glittering powdered sand outside. It was what one might expect from the artist who afterward told us that he conceived a stage setting primarily not as a landscape or as architecture, but as though it were a painting into which the human figures had not yet been painted. "From each setting," he continued, "I discard the entire range of nuances which do not amplify or intensify the hidden spirit of the fable." Add to this the fact that the composer, the *maitre de ballet*, the stage decorator, the dancers and mimes were all of the same race working in harmony, and you will not be surprised at the artistic unity of the production. The composers orchestrated for the ears, Bakst for the eyes. The inimitable interpreters were Pavlowa, dainty and divine, the charming Karsavina, the incomparable Nijinsky, their



admirable dancing-master Fokine, who has done so much for the Russian ballet, and the strange Mme. Rubinstein, whose mysterious beauty dominated the drama. As the story unfolded, we saw groups of sleek Syrians in silver, gaudy Jewesses with headdresses of pearls and rubies, svelte Egyptian dancers in golden tissues, Dionysian priestesses, corybantes, and black *serviteurs*, whose extraordinary costumes were always in keeping with their respective characters. It was a vision of the scene in Gautier's story, so satisfying and enchanting that the great audience held its breath. Bakst's fame was assured, although he had only just begun to disclose the unsuspected sides of his inventive genius.

The productions which followed in the French capital and in London were a succession of surprises and triumphs, and it became difficult to remain a collected observer or critic before these dazzling creations, which aroused feverish emotions and overcame the senses like a flask of attar of roses. Bakst extracted the poetry hidden in every epoch and showed that he possessed in an amazing degree the Greek *εὐτραπεία*—what Matthew Arnold called "happy flexibility"—the power to properly adapt his varied talents to any subject in hand.

In "Cléopâtre" and "Salomé" he was, of course, Egyptian. In "Narcisse," "Daphnis and Chloë," "L'Après-Midi d'un Faune," and Verhaeren's "Hélène de de Sparte," we saw his Greek inventions, and his designs crystallize forever our happy memories of delicate archaic maidens in light draperies with golden ornaments in their



hair, of dancing Satyrs, and above all, of Nijinsky as the perplexed Faun, "nympharum fugientum amator." Bakst's fresh, sparkling drawings are not copies from antique vases, statuary, or bas-reliefs in the sense that Thorwaldsen's or Canova's works are. Instead of making weak imitations or classically correct drawings, Bakst first assimilates and then transforms everything he touches. We derive greater pleasure from his works than from any Greek restorations, because he has absorbed the essentials of the ancient style and has breathed the breath of life into them. In "Le Dieu Bleu" he treated Anamese and Javanese styles after the same fashion, his prodigious exotic imagination calling to mind the art of Gustave Moreau and Odilon Rédon. These drawings have the glamour of the Indies but retain the stamp and style of Léon Bakst. The detail is amazingly intricate, but he has learned the secret of subordinating it to the main lines of his design, just as an Eastern artist would have done. "Thamar" is hybrid, showing Trans-Caucasian and Chinese origins. Then there are a series of ballets—"Les Papillons" and "La Carnaval," among others—where *sauterie* plays an important rôle. For these the costumes do not differ so radically from what any other clever decorator might have designed. Among operas we have the brilliant rococo setting of Wolf-Ferrari's "The Secret of Suzanne," and superb national costumes and scenery for "Boris Godounow," in which the Byzantine note predominates. The mediæval period furnished inspiration for D'Annunzio's "Pisanelle" and the same poet's "St. Sebastien," from which we carried away a vivid mental picture of the martyred saint, imper-

sonated by the morbidly graceful Mme. Rubinstein, who made the sophisticated Paris audience exclaim, "Mais, elle va mourir !" Quite recently Bakst startled his admirers with the athletic ballet "Les Jeux," and then delighted them by making a number of fantasies on modern costumes which were quickly seized upon by purveyors to women of fashion who made his color harmonies the latest cry. His most recent work, the "Orientale," had its *première* in America with Mlle. Pavlowa in the leading rôle, and the singular charm of the world's greatest dancer was not more wonderful than the harmonious setting of Bakst, whose genius revealed itself as it did in the ballet "Scheherazade," still regarded as his masterpiece and most characteristic work.

In this magnificent prelude to the Arabian Nights, Bakst is his amazing oriental self. The ancient Persians themselves could not have found fault with his marvellous setting. No Frenchman, nor any artist influenced by French ideas, would have dared to use such a gamut of brilliant colors at a time when our drab, occidental culture sought appropriate expression in flat subdued tones. Bakst, however, was an exuberant Semitic barbarian, and he wanted his colors, like his characters, to sing and shout and dance with joyous abandon. Fortunately, Paris stood aghast long enough for her discerning arbiters of good taste to win the day for the Russian artist, and a renaissance of color set in. Emerald, indigo and geranium, the leopard's spots, and the scales of the serpent, black, rose, vermilion and triumphant orange, were all shrieking to be

heard, and shrieking in harmony. It was an orgy of color to the last possible tension. Nature was sacrificed by him, though not so violently as by Van Gogh or the Post-Impressionists, in order to arouse the emotions. The effect of the colors was enforced and exalted by the voluptuous movements of the dancers and the astonishing music which Rimsky-Korsakow had written for this miracle of joint creation. Had the author of "Les Fleurs du Mal" been present, he would have hailed the colorist as a great epic poet. Haughty sultans embraced their false sultanas, grinning eunuchs, like gorgeous speckled birds, dangled golden keys while their doom was impending, powerful exultant lovers, black as ebony, whirled the frenzied women about, to the tunes of baleful Hindoo musicians. The maddest desires dwelt in this palace of splendid sins, where eternal agony was the price of the happiness of the poignant fleeting moment. It was a fascinating dream of brutal sensuality, of regal jealousy. As a French critic pointed out, every color was used by Bakst save white—the symbol of purity and arctic frigidity—to accentuate the warmth of the passions of these ardent lovers. It was sensual, but in a youthful, robust way,—like the Song of Songs, or a Bacchanale of Rubens.

Here at last was a great artist who deigned to devote his gifts to the stage. In Russia his appearance would not have been regarded as a rare phenomenon, for they were accustomed to the presence in the theatre of their best artists, men who revelled in the vast spaces and the luxurious amplitude which the stage allows. Bakst's friend




Benois, whose easel paintings are highly esteemed, created the splendor of "Le Pavillon d'Armide" and "Petruschka." He is a scholarly critic, the author of a valuable History of Painting, and a recognized authority on French styles. The primitive Russian periods, the desolate steppes, fantastic forests, and the savagely colored clothes are specialties of Théodor Fédorovsky, and Roerich, Director of the Academy at Petrograd. The *décors* by the latter for his own "Sacre du Printemps" and for Borodine's opera, "Prince Igor," created a sensation and elicited a eulogy from Jacques Blanche, who considered their violent crudity epoch-making theatrical innovations. Boris Anisfeld, whose scenery for "The Seven Daughters of the Ghost King" will be used at the Metropolitan Opera House, is a very talented follower of the men we have mentioned. Paris also made much of the interesting artist Soudejkine, a color symbolist whose art has much in common with the Post-Impressionists. His theories are as vague as the verbal paradoxes of the Futurists, but the appeal of his decorations for "Salomé" is swift and compelling and his success in the theatre has been considerable. Other gifted men were employed by Diaghilew to rehabilitate the Russian stage, but to add to the list here would not answer any important purpose.

Bakst's triumphs, however, did not end with the theatre, for when his little *maquettes*, glowing like Persian parchments, were exhibited, the finest continental connoisseurs were eager to acquire them, and the city of Paris honored him by purchasing a collection of his works. It will be

readily seen that these alluring aquarelles, with their rich touches of silver and gold, are things of passion in themselves, and have a value quite apart from the stage. Indeed, in the case of many of the Greek designs, we almost prefer to enjoy their repose in a quiet studio rather than in the theatre. Studying a mixed group of them we can best appreciate what a great virtuoso Bakst is. They are not mere fashion plates or ordinary costume drawings, although the vestments, which move with the natural rhythm of birds' wings, seem to be the living things. The figures, whose bodies and very souls are enveloped by color, are only lightly suggested, being subordinate to the gestures and draperies, which accentuate and display to the greatest advantage the beauty of the young supple muscles, round bosoms, and powerful thighs. Every drawing, whether in a tender or a vigorous mood, is intensely alive and singularly persuasive, and its æsthetic value will eventually be heightened by its historical importance. When the huge settings will crumble and the fashion for opera and the ballet will change, we shall still have these exciting designs to remind us that we had in our midst a stimulating artist, who delivered us forever from the old-fashioned *divertissement*. Bakst's name will then be linked, not only with those of the prominent contemporary painters, but with modern innovators like William Morris and Gordon Craig, who from time to time gave an impetus to decoration and infused the theatre and our lives with new spirit.

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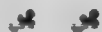
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